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Music as ideal: the aesthetics of autonomy

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By the second half of the nineteenth century music had achieved a central position among the arts, to the extent that, as Walter Pater put it in 1877 in his now celebrated *aperçu*, 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'.[1] This registered a remarkable change in the aesthetic status of music in the hundred years from the 1780s to the 1880s. From an art form regarded as a pleasant but meaningless entertainment without cognitive value, music had come to be viewed as the vehicle of ineffable truths beyond conceptualisation. Although the idea of art music as an autonomous, non-conceptual reflection of inwardness upon itself had remained a constant throughout this period, what had changed was the perception of music by the other arts and the interpretation of this non-conceptuality, particularly in philosophical aesthetics. While the focus in this essay is on music and ideas in the period from 1848, the centrality of the concept of autonomy to the other arts by the late nineteenth century also provides other vantage points from which to view a phenomenon which was to become largely naturalised within music itself. It can be argued, indeed, that for this very reason music calls for awareness of its reflections outside itself, in particular in literature and philosophy, in order for the implications of its autonomy and non-conceptuality to be recognised more fully. An example to illustrate this point is to be found in Joris-Karl Huysmans's infamous novel *A Rebours* of 1884, a work which takes to its extremes the retreat into the inner world and the rejection of the dominant Realism and Naturalism of its time.

Huysmans's novel has a single character: le Duc Jean des Esseintes, an aristocratic recluse and aesthete modelled on the eccentric and decadent Comte de Montesquiou. Des Esseintes conducts a bizarre and extended experiment: he withdraws from society and sets about a solitary and intensive exploration of each of the senses in turn, which he pursues in a manner that takes to its ultimate extreme the 'art for art's sake' aesthetic of the late nineteenth century, the paradigm for which was music. Within his artificially sealed-off world (he even has his servants wear special costumes, so that their silhouettes cast on the

1 Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', in Jennifer Uglow (ed. and intro.), *Essays on Literature and Art* (London, 1973), p. 51.

blinds at the windows to his rooms should not remind him of the real world outside) des Esseintes aims to give himself up exclusively, as a man of private means free from the distractions of family and the need to make a living, to the contemplation and exploration of the aesthetic experience and of works of art. He exhaustively considers each art form in isolation, its distinguishing features and inner logic, and analyses and experiments upon his own aesthetic sensibilities with all the precision of the natural scientist and the refined sensitivity of the artist. Not only does he reflect upon the treasures of art and philosophy of the past in his extensive private library and art collection: he also explores the new and the previously uncharted. Where an appropriate art form corresponding to a particular sense is lacking, he invents it. He conjures up whole poetic landscapes from the art of perfumery, studying its syntax, developing its history and refining its analysis. But his *pièce de résistance* is what he calls his 'mouth organ': an elaborate instrument which enables him to compose

> a music of liqueurs [upon his tongue] . . . playing internal symphonies to himself, and providing his palate with sensations analogous to those which music dispenses to the ear . . . to hear inside his mouth crème-de-menthe solos and rum-and-vespetro duets . . . mixing or contrasting related liqueurs, by subtle approximations and cunning combinations.[2]

This extravagant metaphor from the literature of the end of the nineteenth century indicates powerfully the extent of music's penetration across the arts – music as an *ideal*, as the touchstone for all aesthetic experience. Contained here are also the two conflicting tendencies which mark the nineteenth century as the watershed of modernity: Idealism and Positivism, the aesthetic escape from reality and the scientific analysis of reality. Des Esseintes rejects the outer world of empirical reality – the dominant scientific Positivism of the nineteenth century – only to apply its systematic methodology to the inner world of aesthetic experience and to the exquisite refinement of the senses. The ultimate fulfilment of art, the expansion of the aesthetic domain to include all aspects of sensual experience, also spells the end of art in its traditional sense, and certainly the end of Romanticism, and it is tempting to see in it the apotheosis of Hegel's prediction of the end of art and his diagnosis of the decadence of Romanticism. In its combination of historicism (the systematic survey of the store-house of the art, literature, music and philosophy of the past) and the New (the exploration of the limits of the senses and of aesthetic experience) it shows itself not only to be in tune with the spirit of its age (for example, the refined mediaevalism to be seen in the art of the 1880s – the Pre-Raphaelite

2 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, a translation of *A Rebours* by Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth, 1959), pp. 58–9.

painters and poets, and works like Debussy's *La damoiselle élue* and Satie's Rosicrucian pieces), but also the extent to which it belongs to the anti-Romantic spirit of the avant-garde. Above all, it shows itself to be the heir to the dominant idea of nineteenth-century aesthetics, and the concept to which all others can be seen to relate: the autonomy-character of music. It is the aim of this chapter to explore this concept and its cluster of related ideas.

Autonomy, expression and the decline of Romanticism

Art music, which had detached itself historically from any direct social function, was generally understood as the ultimate vehicle for a free-floating, inward-looking subjectivity which, in the absence of concepts and representation, referred only to itself. Hegel, whose influence spanned the century, and whose attitude to Romanticism was distinctly ambivalent, had proposed that 'the keynote of Romantic art is *musical*'.[3] As Sanna Pederson has pointed out, however, 'Hegel seemed to distrust this emancipation from external reference, which could also imply a lack of spiritual content'.[4] For Hegel, music was problematical because of its indeterminateness, and it was 'concerned only with the completely indeterminate movement of the inner spirit and with sounds as if they were feeling without thought'.[5] The problem articulated by Hegel in his Berlin Lectures on Aesthetics in the 1820s (which were published posthumously in 1842 and continued to resonate in the second half of the century) had a considerable legacy for all the arts, as the example from Huysmans's novel shows. It also had a pre-history (see chapter 2) which is of relevance to the later part of the century, and with which there are certain parallels.

While in the first half of the nineteenth century there arose the notion of absolute music which laid claim to the metaphysical peaks of human experience as a language of the emotions beyond the reach of conceptual thought, it is also important to recognise that the dominance of the concept of autonomy and of the idea of absolute music were by no means total. Opera, oratorio, ballet, salon and 'trivial music' continued to occupy proportionately far greater numbers than symphonic and chamber music for the mass of the nineteenth-century music-loving public. To an extent, therefore, it must be argued that the idea of music as an art existing in and for itself has to be understood in this period not simply as the dominating aesthetic ideal, but as a metaphysi-

3 G. W. F. Hegel, *Ästhetik*, vols. I/II (Stuttgart, 1971), p. 578. Cited in Sanna Pederson, 'Romantic Music under Siege in 1848', in Ian Bent (ed.), *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 59–60.

4 Pederson, 'Romantic Music', p. 60.

5 Hegel, *Ästhetik*, vols. I/II. Cited in Pederson, 'Romantic Music', p. 60.

cal aspiration, rather than as a social fact, an ideal which had ramifications beyond music itself, and which owes its success as a paradigm as much to its contradictory relation to the social context of the nineteenth century as to its origins in late eighteenth-century German Idealist philosophy and French Enlightenment rationalism.

As the century proceeds, music as an art form becomes increasingly self-contained and self-reflective. This applies not only to so-called 'absolute' music, as instrumental music without words, but also to its extension into the theatre in the form of the Wagnerian music drama, where the expansion through concepts is designed to achieve a cognitive status previously denied to music by Kant and Hegel. Indeed, one can even include here the involvement of autonomous music in nineteenth-century Nationalism in the context of the creation of national identities. To put it in Wagner's terms, music 'comes of age', becomes mature and aware of itself and its context – a context which includes both an involvement of art with politics and society and, equally, the retreat from any obvious sense of social involvement. Wagner, unlike Hegel, saw Beethoven as the touchstone for this process of 'coming of age', calling him in his essay 'The Art-work of the Future' (1849), 'the Master, who was called to write upon his works the *world-history of Music*', and who saw the necessity '*to find out for himself the country of the Manhood of the Future*'.[6] Music, with its long association with metaphors of language, becomes regarded as a kind of language without concepts, a form of 'conceptless cognition'.

While for much of the century this process also goes in parallel with the aesthetics of expression, as is seen in the rapturous claims of Wackenroder, Herder and E. T. A. Hoffmann and in the music journalism of composers like Weber, Berlioz and Schumann, it also led to a tension between 'form' and 'expression', between the immanent formalist relations of musical structure and the need to justify music's free-floating, dynamic expressivity with reference to an object exterior to it. By the mid-century composers were seeking to anchor musical expression in more concrete terms in the extra-musical – in literary programmes, dramatic narrative, gesture, Romantic notions of nature and of national identity (the two latter frequently linked through evocations of folk and community). Wagner's theories of music drama and *Gesamtkunstwerk* played a key role in this process, which was essentially the attempt to solve the problem of absolute music's non-conceptual character. Nietzsche, who initially took his cue from Wagner in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) but then rejected him, together with their mutual source of inspiration Arthur Schopenhauer, went on to contribute further thoughts towards the clarification of this

6 Richard Wagner, *The Art-work of the Future and Other Works*, trans. W. Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, Nebr., and London, 1993), pp. 123, 125 (italics in original).

problem in his *Human, All Too Human* (1878). I shall discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

Right from the beginning of the century, however, there are two distinctly different emphases that can be identified, each with quite different implications for the second half of the century. The first of these is located around the new aesthetics of expression (as opposed to the older aesthetics of music, like that of Sulzer, which was really a development from the doctrine of affections, a theory which had lasted right up to the late eighteenth century). This new aesthetics of expression from the early nineteenth century is essentially an aesthetics of content, where the content in question could be understood as the sensitive listener's own emotional response to the music, or, to put it another way, as the inner world of the listener shaped by the dynamic temporal unfolding of the music, as 'sounding inwardness'. It is first associated with Wackenroder, then with the powerful twist given to the idea by Schopenhauer. The second emphasis from this period is located around a new aesthetics of musical form, and is initially associated with Friedrich von Schlegel, and later at the mid-century with the decisive contribution of Eduard Hanslick.

The delayed influence of Schopenhauer's dualistic metaphysics of expression, together with Hanslick's formalist critique of musical expressivity, also served paradoxically to reinforce the autonomy-character of music, in spite of the fierce debates to which the two positions gave rise at the time. By the end of the century the concept of autonomy had also come to embrace literature in its retreat from referentiality, particularly through the contradictory but all-encompassing influence of Wagner on the Symbolists reinforced by the reception of Baudelaire and the *Revue Wagnérienne*. Subsequently painting is also drawn into the orbit of music in a seemingly inexorable move from representation towards increasing abstraction (something to be seen in the paintings of Klimt and in particular in the *Blue Rider Almanac* of 1911 and the interaction between Kandinsky and Schoenberg).[7]

It would, however, be a considerable oversimplification to see the progress of the idea of autonomy, of absolute music, as an unbroken line of development which swept through the nineteenth century without disruption and without any change of character, from the Idealism of Wackenroder and Schelling at its beginnings to the muted poetic Symbolism of Mallarmé and Pater at its *fin de siècle*. The concept of autonomy, central as it is to nineteenth-century music, needs to be understood as one of a cluster of ideas which can best serve to illuminate the underlying music aesthetics of the period when taken as an ensemble, albeit an ensemble of oppositions. The nineteenth century, particularly

7 Cf. Jelena Hahl-Koch (ed.), *Schoenberg–Kandinsky: Letters* (London, 1980).

given the remarkable dissemination of German philosophical thinking throughout Europe and North America, is the age of the dialectic. The philosophy of Hegel, which had itself grown out of the attempt to systematise the fragmentary speculative insights of the early Romantics on the nature of subjectivity through a fusion with the critical rationality of Kant's philosophy, taught the century to think of unity and totality in terms of a dynamic logic of contradiction and opposition. Given the all-pervading presence of Hegel's thinking, and the extent to which it functions as the *modus operandi* of Romantic aesthetics and music theory, it would therefore seem entirely appropriate to take a dialectical approach to the discussion of the ideas themselves, and to the uncovering of their underlying ideology, that of organicism. Thus it is the complex, frequently contradictory, but extremely fruitful interaction of these ideas that is striking in the musical aesthetics of this period. As well as embracing such apparently polarised extremes as the aesthetics of expression and the mid-century arguments in support of formalism, they are also characterised by the extreme singularity of autonomous music and the ambitions for the fusion of the arts; the aesthetics of 'inwardness', for which autonomous music serves as the paradigm, and an outer world dominated increasingly as the century progresses by the commercialisation and industrialisation of the public arena. Connected with this, there are the spiritual claims made for art, and for music in particular, contrasted with the materialism of society at large and the positivism of scientific method. And importantly, there is the social context of all this to be taken into account: the new class relations which emerge with Romanticism, associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie, whose view of the world it initially celebrates, but which it then turns against after the mid-century.

Romanticism, in the metaphysical sense in which it had been understood at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was already in decline by the 1840s. The two opposing aesthetic positions identified here as the aesthetics of expression and the aesthetics of form persist through this decline, but take on a different character. The first becomes, in effect, a refocusing of the aesthetics of feeling towards what has been called variously neo-romanticism and emotional Realism, characterised by erotic sensualism and the attempt to attach the expression of definite emotions to the extra-musical. The second gives rise to the apparently anti-expression aesthetic of formalism, with its insistence that music is incapable of the direct expression of emotions, whether definite or indefinite (although it is debatable that this ever really constituted a genuinely anti-expression stance, in the sense in which this became important, for example, in the neo-classicism of the twentieth century). I shall address this second position, the formalist, in detail later through an examination of

Hanslick's argument in *On the Beautiful in Music*. First I shall consider the extension of the aesthetics of expression at the mid-century.

The subsequent development of the aesthetics of expression from a metaphysical into a more literal and, indeed, 'physical' or concrete form is associated with the New German School of Wagner and Liszt, and with the development of the music drama and the symphonic poem (see chapters 11 and 14 for fuller discussion). The musical origins of this so-called neo-romanticism and Realism lie in Berlioz's literary programmatic symphonies and the influence of Weber's operatic use of reminiscence techniques, together with his evocation of nature and the supernatural. An important aspect of the new materialism and sensuality which characterises the aesthetics of expression in mid-nineteenth-century music is an emphasis on the erotic. A key work in this development is Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (1845), and as Edward Lippman points out, a parallel philosophical argument for this position can be found in Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843).[8] Kierkegaard, in his discussion of 'The Musical-Erotic' in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, proposes that it is music's very abstractness that enables it to express erotic sensuousness, to give it concrete form and immediacy: 'The most abstract idea conceivable is the sensuous in its elemental originality. But through which medium can it be presented? Only through music.'[9] What makes *Don Giovanni* a great work for Kierkegaard is its unity of poetry and music and its fusion of form and content. Mozart's genius is to have unified a subject-matter (Don Juan as the embodiment of the sensuous) with music which is also the embodiment of the sensuous. The dominating idea of the work – that is, Don Juan as the epitome of the sensuous – is both its form and its content. As Kierkegaard puts it: 'its idea is altogether musical in such a way that the music does not help along as accompaniment but discloses its own innermost nature as it discloses the idea'.[10] Such a notion of the absolute unity of drama and music would appear to restore the opera to the sphere of autonomous music.

However, striking as this parallel is, there is no suggestion, of course, that Wagner himself was in any sense influenced by Kierkegaard. But what is significant for any discussion of the wider influence of the concept of autonomy is the position taken by the philosopher himself – his existential predicament, which is one of isolation and alienation. An important theme in the essay on *Don Giovanni* concerns what it is to live aesthetically – that is, to live the aesthetic life. Kierkegaard represents an extreme case of the 'inwardness' which characterises German Idealist philosophy (and to which tradition the Danish

8 Edward Lippman, *A History of Western Musical Aesthetics* (Lincoln, Nebr., and London, 1992), p. 240.

9 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, 1987), p. 56. 10 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

philosopher essentially belongs). Kierkegaard is of interest in this context because he is a philosopher who has rejected systematic philosophising, and aspires towards artistic praxis, but is nevertheless not an artist. The existentialist abyss he faces represents an impasse at the mid-century which is bridged by art with, it can be argued, the assistance of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Adorno, in his first published book *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, writes: '[Kierkegaard] gives testimony to the isolation of an intellectual, living on private income, shut in on himself; an isolation that, in this period of late German Romanticism and late idealism, was expressed in philosophy only by Schopenhauer'.[11] This aspiration of philosophy towards art, with its accompanying rejection of academic systematising and tendency towards the aphorism, is also in part provoked by the encounter with music and the version of an isolated, self-reflective inwardness it was felt to embody. It is a line of development which runs through Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard via Nietzsche to Ernst Bloch and Adorno in the twentieth century.

1848: revolution, disenchantment and the retreat into inwardness

The significant turning-point in the mid-century which marks the character of that 'inwardness' as alienation is represented by the failed revolutions of the years 1848–9. Already from the early 1840s the ground was being prepared for this upheaval, and the manifestations were evident in the arts as elsewhere, with a move in the direction of Realism and Naturalism. Sanna Pederson puts this succinctly:

> As the political landscape began to change in the 1840s, the attitude towards Romantic art became more hostile. Liberal intellectuals who now focused on how to seize governmental power blamed Germany's political and economic backwardness on the people's fascination with Romanticism. Subjective inwardness was equated with passive, ineffective and escapist behaviour. Music did not escape the increasing tendency to treat Romanticism with suspicion.[12]

Whereas the early Romantics had managed to combine their retreat into subjectivity with the moderate engagement with society available to the rising bourgeoisie and its aspirations in the wake of the French Revolution, the disillusion following the failure of the political aspirations of 1848 led to disengagement and alienation. This was keenly felt in Germany with the dashing of the utopian hopes raised by the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848, an assembly dominated by liberal intellectuals who perhaps naïvely underestimated the forces of

11 T. W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 1989), p. 8. 12 Pederson, 'Romantic Music', p. 64.

political reaction ranged against them. The result was despair, a bitter retreat from involvement in political life, and, it can be argued, a marked political reaction contrasting sharply with the radical political involvement among artists and intellectuals which led up to 1848. The suppression of the revolution in Paris was particularly brutal. The account by the Russian liberal exile Alexander Herzen, who witnessed the 'June days' of 1848 in Paris, when the socialist working classes in the city rose in defiance of the bourgeois national legislature, and were bloodily slaughtered, brings home the cataclysmic effect of the failure:

> No living man can remain the same after such a blow. He either turns more religious, clinging desperately to his creed and finding a kind of consolation in despair, and, struck by the thunderbolt, his heart yet again sends forth new shoots. Or else, manfully, though reluctantly, he parts with his last illusions, taking an even more sober view and loosening his grip on the last withered leaves being whirled away by the biting autumnal wind. Which is preferable? It is hard to say. One leads to the bliss of folly, the other to the misery of knowledge.[13]

These extremes are epitomised in the poetry of Baudelaire in France and – to an extent – in the music of Wagner in Germany. The change is strikingly evident in the jaundiced modernism of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* (1857), with its combination of disillusion and utopian aspiration, the visionary search for the new and unknown, for inner distant shores to escape the dull passage of time and the mundane experience of the everyday, to be seen in a poem like 'Le voyage':

> Amer savoir, celui qu'on tire du voyage!
> Le monde monotone et petit, aujourd'hui,
> Hier, demain, toujours, nous fait voir notre image:
> Une oasis d'horreur dans un désert d'ennui!
>
> [What bitter wisdom does the voyage give!
> The world, small, dull, today and yesterday,
> Tomorrow, will our likeness still revive:
> Oasis grim in our Sahara grey!][14]

The ecstatic desperation of the final stanza of the poem, with its imagery of death and deliverance, can hardly help but call to mind that other passionate retreat into inwardness and extinction of the same year – Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*:

13 Alexander Herzen, 'After the Storm', *From the Other Shore*, trans. L. Navrozov, in Roland N. Stromberg (ed.), *Realism, Naturalism and Symbolism: Modes of Thought and Expression in Europe, 1848–1914* (New York, 1968), pp. 4–5.

14 Charles Baudelaire, 'Le voyage', *Selected Poems*, trans. Joanna Richardson (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp. 214–15.

Verse-nous ton poison pour qu'il nous réconforte!
Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver de *nouveau*!

[Pour forth your poison, our deliverance!
This fire consumes our minds, let's bid adieu,
Plumb Hell or Heaven, what's the difference?
Plumb the Unknown, to find out something *new*!][15]

In this respect Carl Dahlhaus has commented: 'As chary as we should otherwise be of historiological speculations based on dates, the temptation is well-nigh irresistible to see more than a mere coincidence in the fact that *Tristan* was written at the same time as Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* (1857), the *fons et origo* of the modern movement in poetry'.[16] Wagner's own involvement in the May revolution of 1849 in Dresden, and his subsequent exile and retreat into the sphere of art provides support for those who argue that the birth of modernism and the European avant-garde lies in the ruins of the 1848–9 uprisings. Adorno argued that 'the category of "the modern" . . . emerges for the first time with Baudelaire, and indeed in the emphatic sense in which it is now used', citing 'Le voyage' as the key manifesto of the beginnings of aesthetic modernism.[17] And in his monumental history of the nineteenth century Eric Hobsbawm draws the contrast between the art for art's sake position before 1848 and the change that followed after:

> 'Art for art's sake', though already formulated, mostly by conservatives or dilettantes, could not as yet compete with art for humanity's sake, or for the nations' or the proletariat's sake. Not until the 1848 revolutions destroyed the Romantic hopes of the great rebirth of man, did self-contained aestheticism come into its own.[18]

The disenchantment following the failure of the 1848 revolutions across Europe, and the general retreat of the arts from social engagement into the inwardness which had characterised the German Romantic aesthetic from the earlier part of the century, sows in the period of late Romanticism the seeds of modernism and the avant-garde. The growth of an 'ideology of organicism' can also be seen as a product of the project of autonomy and of the aesthetics of inwardness. This, however, needs to be understood in relation to the parallel (and apparently conflicting) growth of positivist scientific method, which was reflected in the development of musicology and music historiography as

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 216–17.
16 Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. B. Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), p. 203. 17 T. W. Adorno, *Vorlesungen zur Ästhetik 1967–68* (Zurich, 1973), p. 50.
18 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848* (London, 1962), p. 325.

detached, positivistic disciplines, and also in the development of the physiology and psychology of music. This had already begun with the distinctly non-Positivist, Hegelian Idealist A. B. Marx, who played a central role in the establishment of music theory in the mid-century, but whose plans for the rationalisation and development of music pedagogy in schools had the official support of the Prussian state. The consolidation of musicology as an independent discipline continues in the later part of the century through the efforts of Friedrich Chrysander and Philip Spitta, culminating in the systematic musicology of Guido Adler and in the new music theory associated with Hugo Riemann and his circle. The search for the origins of music in primitive forms of communication and animal cries, together with the development of the psychology of music showed the immediate influence of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories – music's biological origins and its relation to language[19] – as well as the extension of Darwinism in the psychological and philosophical writings of Herbert Spencer.[20] This is manifest in a diverse range of theorists at this period, notably Edmund Gurney, probably the most significant English writer on music in the nineteenth century, and Richard Wallaschek, whose debates with Spencer on the origins of music appeared in the journal *Mind* in the 1890s.[21]

The apparently irresistible confidence and dominance of the natural sciences and their conviction that the world can be controlled and explained through the power of rationality, together with the increasing industrialisation and commercialisation of Western society, are the counterpole to what are, in effect, two different versions of the artistic retreat into inwardness and autonomy. This contradiction is that between, on the one hand, a turning inwards of the arts, and, on the other hand, their unavoidable participation in the bustle of the commercial free market in a rapidly industrialising society. This tension is neatly encapsulated by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who wrote in 1894: 'Today, two things seem to be modern: the analysis of life and the flight from life . . . One practises anatomy on the inner life of one's mind, or one dreams.'[22]

There is at the same time a convergence of highly influential ideas which impinge on the neo-romantic aesthetics of expression and draw it in the direction of the extra-musical and associations with the turbulent political context

19 See for instance Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), 3rd edn, with an Introduction, Afterword and Commentaries by Paul Ekman (London, 1998), pp. 91–5, with references to Herbert Spencer.

20 See especially Herbert Spencer, 'The Origin and Function of Music' (1857), in *Literary Style and Music: Essays on Literary Expression, the Origin of Music, and Gracefulness and Beauty* (New York, 1951), pp. 45–106.

21 See Bojan Bujic (ed.), *Music in European Thought 1851–1912* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 322–6, for extracts from Wallaschek's response to Spencer.

22 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, cited in James McFarlane, 'The Mind of Modernism', in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds.), *Modernism 1890–1930* (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 71.

of the time. That these all have great resonance in Wagner's writings and in his music is undeniable. But what is equally evident, as Dahlhaus has observed,[23] is the stylistic *divergence* of the music of these years, and the absence of a single dominant style. While it is clear that the conception of an absolute music, free-standing and autonomous, continues to act as centre of gravity for the mid-century, the resistance to the idea also belongs to its force-field. Nationalism and Realism in music would appear at first sight to be pulling in the opposite direction to that of absolute music, towards extra-musical referentiality at the very least, and towards the functional context of music and the shaping of national identities. Having said this, however, there is no doubt that the dominant paradigm remains that of German instrumental music, with Beethoven's symphonies and overtures read as 'programmatic', and German Romantic opera with its evocation of the mysterious and supernatural, but particularly Weber's operatic overtures, as its exemplars. Vladimir Stasov, the highly influential nineteenth-century Russian music critic and protagonist of the Russian nationalist school, emphasises this reading in relation to Glinka when he writes:

> What are most of Beethoven's overtures (*Leonora*, *Coriolanus*, *Egmont*, etc.), certain parts of his last quartets, many of his sonatas, and all save his first two symphonies if not 'programme music'?...The overtures of Weber, Mendelssohn, and Berlioz are also programmatic. All of this music is far, far removed from the 'absolute music' of earlier days.[24]

The rejection of the idea of absolute music in this case merely serves to perpetuate its technical means, albeit ostensibly towards other ends. Furthermore, it is also striking that French and Italian music, dominated as they were by grand opera and music for the theatre, also demonstrate a certain convergence with German absolute music by the 1870s and 1880s, with Saint-Saëns's project to introduce instrumental musical forms and genres to France after the Franco-Prussian War (admittedly also for reasons to do with the bolstering of French national self-esteem), and the evident influence of Wagnerian music drama on the late works of Verdi. Indeed, the influence of Wagner increasingly dominates all the arts by the 1870s, in large part due to his remarkable achievement in calculatedly imbuing the apparently abstract material of autonomous music, the symphonic tradition, with a sensuous symbolism which opens it up as never before to extra-musical correspondences. Paradoxically, the vital inspiration for Wagner in the achievement of this aim was Schopenhauer, a philosopher who, in his philosophy at least, taught the renunciation of the world of appearance and detachment from the Will.

23 Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, pp. 193–4.

24 Vladimir Stasov, *Selected Essays on Music*, trans. Florence Jonas (London, 1968), pp. 74–5.

The aesthetics of feeling: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche

Although Schopenhauer belongs firmly to the Idealist tradition of the first half of the nineteenth century, the full effect of his *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Idea*) (1818; 2nd edn 1844) was not really felt until the period following the 1848 revolutions. Indeed, he is probably, next to Nietzsche, the most influential philosopher of the second half of the century. For Schopenhauer the power of art is the joining of the sensuous particular and the world of universal Ideas (and in this we see a return to the Platonic Ideal Forms). It is through art that we are able to gain some respite and calm from the restless striving of the world of sense and know the universal for an instant in a state of will-less contemplation. It is music which he sees as the most direct representation or expression of the Will, and simultaneously as the art form most immediately capable of freeing us from the force of the Will. But more than this, music constitutes for him a kind of philosophising without concepts, and furthermore, he claims, if one were to succeed in conceptualising music accurately, then one would have succeeded in conceptualising and explaining the world, as music is its essence, its in-itself. Towards the end of his lengthy discussion of music in *The World as Will and Idea* he summarises his argument in the following terms:

> In the whole of this exposition of music I have been trying to bring out clearly that it expresses in a perfectly universal language, in a homogeneous material, (that is, in mere tones), and with the greatest distinction and truth, the inner nature, the in-itself of the world, which we think of under the concept of will, because will is its clearest manifestation. Further, according to my view and contention, philosophy is nothing but a complete and accurate reproduction and expression of the nature of the world in very general concepts, for only in such is it possible to gain a perspective on that whole nature which will be adequate and applicable everywhere. Thus anyone who has followed me and entered into my mode of thought will not be surprised if I say that, supposing it were possible to give a perfectly accurate, complete, even detailed, explanation of music – that is to say, to reproduce minutely in concepts what it expresses – this would also be a sufficient reproduction and explanation of the world in concepts, or at least equivalent to such an explanation, and thus it would be the true philosophy. Consequently Leibnitz's words . . . may be parodied in the following way to suit our loftier view of music: 'music is the unconscious exercise in metaphysics in which the mind does not know that it is philosophising'.[25]

25 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, ed. David Berman, trans. Jill Berman (London, 1995), pp. 171–2.

Schopenhauer brings the theory of expression to the point where it becomes, in a sense, a version of the theory of imitation or representation. But what is being represented is not the outside world of nature, which Schopenhauer sees as *Schein*, mere illusion or appearance. Instead it is inner nature, the force of the Will itself, as a kind of life force, which, through the transfiguring power of music and the detached self-reflectivity which results, gives immediate access to the world of ideas behind the world of appearance. This is a kind of pure knowledge, characterised by aesthetic disinterestedness and detached from the blind force of the Will, a form of 'cognition without concepts'. But, as Dahlhaus suggests, 'this esthetic "rescue" of ideas is precarious and threatened: the realm of esthetics is a realm of appearance and even ideas sink to this realm if they are entrusted entirely to esthetic contemplation'.[26] This extreme version of the theory of expression as immediate manifestation of the inner world of feelings leads, in fact, to the contemplation of pure form. That is to say, it leads paradoxically back to formalism and the theory of form. Thus we arrive at a point where the idea of pure expression, as put forward by Schopenhauer, becomes what is sometimes mistakenly regarded as its opposite: formalism. Before taking this position further, however, and examining the formalist theory put forward by Eduard Hanslick, I should first like to consider some aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophy in relation to Wagner and Nietzsche.

In his writings from the years 1849–51 we know that Wagner had not yet read Schopenhauer: even so, the late nineteenth-century English translator of his prose writings, William Ashton Ellis, goes so far as to suggest that there is already a remarkable affinity with the philosopher's thought even before he had read him. He notes that 'an attentive perusal [of "The Art-work of the Future" (1849)] cannot fail to bring home to those conversant with Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* the remarkable fact that two cognate minds have developed an almost identical system of philosophy'.[27] When in 1854 Wagner did become familiar with Schopenhauer's monumental work it caused him to relinquish his conviction that music should be at the service of the drama (which he had never really put into practice anyway), and instead to place music at the centre of the music drama (*Tristan und Isolde* is the obvious outcome of this conversion). In a sense, therefore, Schopenhauer's influence also sends Wagner some way back in the direction of absolute music. The effect on Wagner was radical, and is felt not only in *Tristan*, but also in his subsequent theoretical writings, particularly the essay 'Beethoven' (1870). The effect of Schopenhauer on the young Nietzsche was, if anything, even more dramatic, particularly as it was so strongly associated with Nietzsche's infatuation with

26 Carl Dahlhaus, *Esthetics of Music*, trans. William Austin (Cambridge, 1982), p. 46.
27 *The Art-work of the Future and Other Works*, translator's note, p. 69.

Wagner's music and with the composer's own distinctly uncritical reading of Schopenhauer.

Nietzsche first read Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* in 1865, and appears, like Wagner before him, to have succumbed initially to the power of its literary style rather than seeing the problems it presented at a philosophical level. At this stage, now an enthusiastic Schopenhaueran, he remained unconvinced by Wagner's music. In 1868, however, having heard *Tristan*, he was won over, and shortly after had the opportunity to meet the composer. By 1869, when he took up his professorship at Basle University, he had become a close member of the Wagner circle and a frequent visitor to the family home at Tribschen. It is this intoxicating combination of the experience of Wagner's music, the reading of the composer's theoretical works, and the mutual enthusiasm for Schopenhauer that led directly to Nietzsche's first important philosophical book, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. In it he attempted to demonstrate the origins of tragedy (which, like Wagner, he ties to music) in the Dionysian rites of the ancient Greek world, and at the same time to derive from this a general theory of artistic creation. He outlines this position at the start of the book – a passage I cite at length to give the flavour of Nietzsche's rhetoric at this stage, and his at times extreme use of somewhat misleading metaphors:

> We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics when we have come to realize, not just through logical insight but also with the certainty of something directly apprehended [*Anschauung*], that the continuous evolution of art is bound up with the duality of the *Apolline* and the *Dionysiac* in much the same way as reproduction depends on there being two sexes which co-exist in a state of perpetual conflict interrupted only occasionally by periods of reconciliation. We have borrowed these names from the Greeks who reveal the profound mysteries of their view of art to those with insight, not in concepts, admittedly, but through the penetratingly vivid figures of their gods. Their two deities of art, Apollo and Dionysos, provide the starting point for our recognition that there exists in the world of the Greeks an enormous opposition, both in origin and goals, between the Apolline art of the image-maker or sculptor [*Bildner*] and the imageless art of music, which is that of Dionysos. These two very different drives [*Triebe*] exist side by side, mostly in open conflict, stimulating and provoking [*reizen*] one another to give birth to ever-new, more vigorous offspring in whom they perpetuate the conflict inherent in the opposition between them, an opposition only apparently bridged by the common term 'art' – until eventually, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic 'Will', they appear paired and, in this pairing, finally engender a work of art which is Dionysiac and Apolline in equal measure: Attic tragedy.[28]

28 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Spiers, trans. Ronald Spiers (Cambridge, 1999), p. 14.

While much has been made of the dualistic opposition Nietzsche puts forward between Dionysos and Apollo, which is itself a variation on the dualism of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*, *The Birth of Tragedy* was badly received by fellow scholars at the time. It was widely regarded as lacking any firm scientific or scholarly foundations (the work was regarded as a philological rather than philosophical study, given Nietzsche's post as Professor of Classical Philology at Basle) and was seen as amounting to little more than a propaganda tract in support of Wagner.[29] Nietzsche later repudiated the book, and by 1878 had rejected both Wagner and Schopenhauer. I shall return to a consideration of Nietzsche's position regarding the relation between form and expression after an examination of Hanslick's concept of form.

The aesthetics of form: Hanslick and Nietzsche

Well known for his criticism of Wagner and support of Brahms, Hanslick published the first edition of his influential book *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (*On the Beautiful in Music*) in 1854, and it was a work which was to go through many further editions over the next half century, reaching its eighth edition in 1891. In it, through a critique of the expressivist position in music, he put forward what is often regarded as a purely formalist aesthetic, a position which argues that music is totally autonomous and self-referential, that is, free-standing, not contingent or dependent upon anything outside itself for its meaning, and, importantly, that music is incapable of expressing definite emotions. It is worth considering his position in some detail here, as it represents the autonomist position in music at its most extreme and offers what still remains one of the clearest and most coherent arguments for it. I shall take key stages of his argument one at a time.

Hanslick step by step refutes the expression theory of music. The first stage is through negation. He starts from the position that all musicians assume that music represents definite feelings, but when pressed, they have to admit they cannot say what feelings precisely are being expressed. So they fall back on the position that music can only represent indefinite feelings.

> Although . . . all music theorists tacitly accept and base their arguments on the postulate that music has the power of representing definite emotions, yet their better judgment has kept them from openly avowing it. The conspicuous absence of definite ideas in music troubled their minds and induced them to lay down the somewhat modified principle that the object of music was to awaken and represent indefinite, not definite, emotions.[30]

29 See R. J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and his Philosophy* (Cambridge, rev. edn 1999), pp. 56–85, for an excellent account of *The Birth of Tragedy* and its reception.

30 Eduard Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, trans. Gustav Cohen, ed. Morris Weitz (New York, 1957), p. 37.

But, he argues, this can only mean that music traces the dynamic motion of a feeling, and this is not the same as expressing an indefinite emotion, for to represent an indefinite emotion is a contradiction in terms. The question is *what* is being represented? and this cannot be answered.

> Rationally understood, this can only mean that music ought to deal with the *motion* accompanying a feeling, regardless of its essential part, with what is felt; in other words, that its function is restricted to the reproduction of what we termed the dynamic element of an emotion, a function which we unhesitatingly conceded to music. But this property does not enable music to represent indefinite feelings, for to 'represent' something 'indefinite' is a contradiction in terms. Psychical motion, considered as motion apart from the state of mind it involves, can never become the object of an art, because without an answer to the query, What is moving, or what is being moved? an art has nothing tangible to work upon. That which is implied in the proposition – namely, that music is not intended to represent a definite feeling (which is undoubtedly true) – is only a negative aspect of the question. (p. 37)

Hanslick recognises that thus far his argument has had to focus on the negative task of demonstrating that, in spite of the long-standing conviction to the contrary, music does not represent feelings at all, whether definite or indefinite. His argument hinges on the point that artworks are concerned with individualising the particular out of the general – the concretising of its individual form out of the generalised state of the musical material. To represent an indefinite feeling would therefore be to attempt to move in the opposite direction, from the particular to the general, leaving the question as to what form the general could possibly take under such circumstances. He puts his argument with great clarity in the following terms:

> But what is the positive, the creative, factor in a musical composition? An indefinite feeling as such cannot supply a subject; to utilise it an art would, first of all, have to solve the problem: what *form* can be given to it? The function of art consists in *individualising*, in evolving the definite out of the indefinite, the particular out of the general. The theory respecting 'indefinite feelings' would reverse this process. It lands us in even greater difficulties than the theory that music represents something though it is impossible to define what. This position is but a step removed from the clear recognition that music represents no feelings, either definite or indefinite. Yet where is the musician who would deprive his art of that domain which from time immemorial has been claimed as belonging to it? (pp. 37–8)

Viewed positively, however, the one certainty we are left with is that music in the final analysis is *form*. The first problem of music, therefore, is to give *form* to such dynamic motion. Thus he concludes that music expresses neither definite nor indefinite emotions. The second stage, in chapter III of his book, is to

present the positive aspect of music's lack of expression. So, what then is the beautiful in music according to Hanslick? He writes:

> *Its nature is specifically musical.* By this we mean that the beautiful is not contingent upon nor in need of any subject introduced from without, but that it consists wholly of sounds artistically combined. The ingenious co-ordination of intrinsically pleasing sounds, their consonance and contrast, their flight and reapproach, their increasing and diminishing strength – this it is which, in free and unimpeded forms, presents itself to our mental vision.
>
> (p. 47, italics in original)

Thus, for Hanslick, music is a play of sounds, a kind of sonic equivalent of the kaleidoscope, as *forms*, symmetries, structures (although the metaphor of the kaleidoscope is in many respects an unfortunate and misleading one, as it introduces an unintended element of arbitrariness into Hanslick's argument). The composer shapes the material of music – sounds as rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre. And Hanslick goes on:

> To the question: What is to be expressed with all this material? The answer will be: Musical ideas. Now, a musical idea reproduced in its entirety is not only an object of intrinsic beauty but also an end in itself, and not a means of representing feelings and thoughts. The essence of music is sound and motion. (p. 48)

So there we have it *en nuce*: music is not the expression of feelings at all, but instead is the shaping of the musical *idea* – in purely *musical* terms, as form. Indeed, Hanslick shows himself to be in a direct line of descent from the Idealist philosophers of the early years of the nineteenth century, and appears in particular to be referring back to Hegel, who had argued that art is the shaping of the 'Idea' in sensuous material. But for Hanslick music is not empty form. It is material animated by a mind working within it – the term he uses here is the German word *Geist*, a term which does not translate properly into English, but which can mean variously 'mind', 'spirit' or 'intellect', and which was central to Hegel's dialectical philosophy. Hanslick writes:

> The act of composing is a mental working on material capable of receiving the forms which the mind intends to give. The musical material in the hands of creative genius is as plastic and pliable as it is profuse. Unlike the architect, who has to mould the coarse and unwieldy rock, the composer reckons with the ulterior effect of past sounds . . . A musical composition, as the creation of a thinking and feeling mind, may, therefore, itself possess intellectuality and pathos to a high degree. (pp. 51–2)

For Hanslick, this process, as relation between composer and material, is entirely a *musical* interaction, and the 'idea' of the resulting work is to be understood in purely immanent terms; it cannot be articulated adequately in words

because it is a purely musical matter. But having dismissed expression in music, or at least, having argued that what music expresses is not particular emotions but rather the Idea, Hanslick still avoids confronting the problem of 'meaning' in music. As John Daverio has put it:

> there is at least one fact that Eduard Hanslick's protoformalist aesthetic makes abundantly clear: it is far easier to prove a negative thesis than to forward a positive account of how music, given its discontinuous relationship with objective reality, interacts with meaning. To do so requires a kind of leap over an abyss, a foray, nolens volens, into the murky territory of musical metaphysics.[31]

But Hanslick, anticipating the new Positivism of the second half of the century (he is referred to approvingly by Helmholtz) and the rise of the more sober and systematic ethos of *Musikwissenschaft*, was perhaps understandably reluctant to indulge in excessive metaphysical speculation. At the same time, however, he hints – although he does not draw the necessary conclusions from his theory – that the composer, unlike the architect, in dealing with the material also has to reckon with the effects of past usage. Thus he suggests, without really taking this up, that the material itself is not purely natural, raw material, but is historical, the product of previous interactions between composers and material. The implications of this are also far-reaching, even though not pursued until the twentieth century (for example, in the music aesthetics of T. W. Adorno). If the material is imbued with *Geist*, and possesses 'intellectuality and pathos to a high degree', it is presumably meaningful in the very concrete sense of the musical gestures and genres which form the material itself. Hanslick does not probe deeper, however, leaving his discussion at a disappointingly abstract level.

It is interesting at this juncture to return to Nietzsche, because in the next stage of his development after *The Birth of Tragedy* he addresses the very point where Hanslick leaves off, although without referring to Hanslick's aesthetics. This coincides with Nietzsche's rejection of both Wagner and Schopenhauer after 1878, and thus it also sees a change in his style of philosophising and a shift in his position in relation to music. The new aesthetic is clearly formulated in *Human, All Too Human* (1878), the book which provoked the rift with Wagner, in that section entitled 'From the Soul of Artists and Writers'. What Nietzsche argues here is the recognition of the historical process through which musical figurations, conventions, gestures acquire their apparently immanent musical meanings – that is, largely through former, but now naturalised, associations with drama, poetry, dance and physical gesture. In Aphorism 216 he writes:

31 John Daverio, *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York, 1993), pp. xi–xii.

> It seems that in earlier times, something must often have occurred much like what is now going on before our eyes and ears in the development of music; namely of dramatic music: while music without explanatory dance and miming (language of gesture) is at first empty noise, long habituation to that juxtaposition of music and gesture teaches the ear an immediate understanding of the tonal figures. Finally, the ear reaches a level of rapid understanding such that it no longer requires visible movement, and *understands* the composer without it. Then we are talking about absolute music, that is, music in which everything can be understood symbolically, without further aids.[32]

Of course, this clearly owes much to Wagner's theory of the leitmotif, but at the same time it seeks to demystify the process and generalise it towards an account of the way in which autonomous music really has its origins in association and representation, the traces of which it carries with it in quite concrete terms. In the previous aphorism in *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche hints at the manner in which the essentially empty, non-conceptual formalism of absolute music has come to acquire a type of conceptuality by association:

> 'Absolute music' is either pure form, in the raw state of music, where sounds in rhythm and at various volumes are enough to give joy; or else it is the symbolism of forms that, without poetry, can speak to our understanding (since, after the two arts had undergone a long development together, musical form was finally woven through and through with threads of concepts and feelings).[33]

These aphorisms point in the direction of symbolism by suggesting that the material of music is itself permeated by figures and gestures which are redolent with meaning, but which are sublimated through the form of the work. This gives a sophisticated twist to the aesthetics of expression through bringing it into conjunction with a concept of form. The apparent meaninglessness of autonomous music is thus seen to be a sublimation of meaning in a very material sense. This is hinted at in Hanslick, but is only formulated clearly, albeit briefly and without elaboration, by Nietzsche. And just as such reflections begin to nudge music out of its isolated state of autonomy, so literature and poetics at this period move even more decisively in the direction of music's idealised state of abstraction.

Symbolism, *l'art pour l'art*, and the triumph of the aesthetics of autonomy

In the chapter devoted specifically to music in *A Rebours*, Huysmans reveals the distaste his hero des Esseintes feels for the rude distractions of the concert hall

32 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (Harmondsworth, 1994), p. 129. 33 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

and the unfortunate necessity in the pre-recording age of having to have one's solitary musical aesthetic experience in public in the company of hundreds of others. It is as if, in the retreat from society, and thus inevitably from music as a public art, music itself suffuses all else in the seclusion of the inner world. The logic of music and its 'meaningful meaninglessness' now pervades all the arts and acts as a model for the cultivation of the senses characterised by the strictest autonomy and separation from usefulness, functionalism and utility.

Huysmans's hermetic exploration of the limits of art and of aesthetic experience in *A Rebours* raises a number of definitive issues which can serve as reference points for discussion of the contradictions inherent in the concept of autonomy and the ideal of music. Not least it reveals the extent to which this period looks both ways: it anticipates the rise of modernism and the avant-garde while extending to their extreme the ideas of autonomy, expression, form and fragmentation which were so central to early Romanticism. Pivotal is the connection between the autonomy aesthetic which characterised the French Symbolists and the corresponding musical Impressionism of the *fin de siècle* and the German Idealism and Romanticism of the early part of the century (des Esseintes mentions in passing at the end of the novel, when his self-imposed isolation has been breached and his enclosed world is collapsing under the pressure both of the outside world and of his medical condition, the consolation he derives from reading Schopenhauer). There is the uneasy fascination with religion and religiosity which characterises both parts of the century. For des Esseintes, as we have seen, it is Catholic mysticism and monasticism, combined with a fascination with mediaevalism which has its origins in part in Wagner, but which is also to be seen much in evidence in the Debussy of the 1880s and 1890s. For the Idealists it is the residues of Pietism and a liking for metaphysics, with the tendency for art to elevate itself to the status of an art-religion. These are associated with a number of other developments from which I here identify five. First, and most importantly, there is the retreat from everyday life and the mundane into the inner world of aesthetic subjectivity and its corresponding objectification as the autonomous, hermetically sealed artwork. This is a form of solipsism impossible to defend philosophically but easy to understand historically in view of the disillusion of art and its retreat from engagement after 1848. By the late nineteenth century this is epitomised in Paul Valéry's view of art as 'a closed world', *un monde fermé*, and his wish to transcend what he called 'the monotonous disorder of exterior life'.[34] It can be understood as an extreme version of the early German Idealists' concept of 'inwardness'. Secondly, there is the withdrawal from utility, from means-ends

34 Cf. W. N. Ince, *The Poetic Theory of Paul Valéry: Inspiration and Technique* (Leicester, 1970), p. 71.

rationality, and the elevation of uselessness to the ultimate aesthetic value. In Oscar Wilde's famous epithets from the preface to *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1891) we find: 'From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician . . . All art is quite useless.'[35] This, in effect, can be understood as a return to Kant's argument in *The Critique of Judgment* that art is characterised by 'purposiveness without a purpose': art has the form of purposiveness, but does not have a purpose outside itself. Valéry, who was first associated with Mallarmé and Verlaine in the 1890s, and whose *Monsieur Teste* (1896) was the model for Debussy's music criticism in his *Monsieur Croche* (1901), later wrote:

> The most evident characteristic of a work of art may be termed uselessness . . . In the life of every individual we can . . . circumscribe a peculiar realm constituted by the sum of his 'useless sensations' and 'arbitrary acts'. *Art* originated in the attempt to endow these sensations with a kind of *utility* and these acts with a kind of *necessity*.[36]

And in *Monsieur Teste* we find the original thought for this – the idea that music is the art above all others which gives coherence to the otherwise fleeting and ephemeral, and gives meaning to the otherwise meaningless through providing it with a structural context – that of its autonomous form – thus rendering it conscious and aware of itself:

> Music alone can do it. A sort of *field* controlling these phenomena of consciousness – images, ideas, which without that field would be simply *combinations*, a symmetrical group of all the combinations.[37]

Debussy's own aesthetic, although seldom articulated at any length or with any seriousness, clearly reflects that of the Symbolists in this respect. The idea of the illusory character of art, and of the hermetically sealed inner necessity of music which resists the incursions of the outside world to construct its own context, is plainly evident in a statement he published in *Musica* in October 1902:

> Art is the most beautiful deception of all! And although people try to incorporate the everyday events of life in it, we must hope that it will remain a deception lest it become a utilitarian thing, sad as a factory.[38]

Thirdly, there is the problem of meaning already alluded to. What is striking about the work of the Symbolist poets and writers, including Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry, Maeterlinck and Huysmans, is the extent to which

35 Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1891) (Harmondsworth, 1949), pp. 5–6.

36 Paul Valéry, 'The Idea of Art', in *Aesthetics*, trans. R. Manheim, vol. XIII of *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. J. Mathews (London, 1964), p. 71.

37 *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. J. Mathews, vol. VI, (London, 1973), p. 74.

38 Claude Debussy, 'The Orientation of Music' (1902), in *Debussy on Music: The Critical Writings*, coll. François Lesure, trans. and ed. Richard Langham Smith (New York, 1977), p. 85.

their highly self-aware art sought to distance itself from the everyday meanings of language and to draw on the allusiveness and indirectness of music, a significant aspect of which concerns the sensuous immediacy of words as *sound*. This leads on directly to the fourth point: the rational control of sensuous material, as *matière*, the espousal of formalism, and the rational exploration of the irrational, are central to this – this is Valéry's dialectical oscillation between inspiration and technique, and Mallarmé's exploration of the boundaries of control and chance in his later writings. In weakening the referentiality of language the Symbolists sought to discover an internal rationale for the structuring of the artwork: what Valéry means by 'utility' and 'necessity' implies a purely immanent logic of poetic syntax which at the same time stimulates an endlessly subtle web of allusiveness. At its most experimental extreme, the Symbolist poem comes to parallel in certain respects a musical score, and thus calls for performance. In the prose 'Preface' to the remarkable late poem 'Un coup de dés' ('The throw of the dice') (1897) Mallarmé writes:

> narrative is avoided. Add that from this stripped-down mode of thought, with its retreats, prolongations, flights, or from its very design, there results, for whoever would read it aloud, a musical score. The difference in the type faces, between the dominant motif, a secondary, and adjacent one, dictates their importance for oral expression, and the range or disposition of the characters, in the middle, at the top, or at the bottom of the page, marks the rising and falling of the intonation . . . [Free verse and the prose poem] are joined under a strange influence, that of Music, as it is heard at a concert; several of its methods, which seemed to me to apply to Literature, are to be found here.[39]

And finally, there is the idea of the indivisible fusion of form, content and material represented by music. Indeed, to return to the starting-point of this chapter: Walter Pater had argued that 'all art aspires to the condition of music' precisely because of the general tendency of all art to try to obliterate the distinction between form, content and subject-matter, and increasingly to retreat from representation into abstraction. In 'The School of Giorgione' he writes at length on this aspiration, and even proposes it as an aesthetic criterion of success in all the arts:

> It is the art of music which most completely realises this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of matter and form. In its consummate moments, the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression; they inhere in and completely saturate each other; and to it, therefore, to the condition of its perfect moments, all the arts may be supposed constantly to tend and aspire. In music, then, rather than in poetry, is to be found

39 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. with a commentary by Henry Weinfield (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994), pp. 122–3.

> the true type or measure of perfected art. Therefore, although each art has its incommunicable element, its untranslatable order of impressions, its unique mode of reaching the 'imaginative reason', yet the arts may be represented as continually struggling after the law or principle of music, to a condition which music alone completely realises; and one of the chief functions of aesthetic criticism, dealing with the products of art, new or old, is to estimate the degree in which each of those products approaches, in this sense, to musical law.[40]

Music had arrived at last as the *prima inter pares*, not only accepted as equal in significance to poetry or painting, and indeed to philosophy, but regarded as the model of perfection for all the arts. Verlaine's poem 'Art poétique' ('The Art of Poetry') of 1884, which, as Martin Sorrell suggests, can be taken as his poetic manifesto,[41] speaks not only for the whole Symbolist movement on the centrality of the model provided by autonomous music, but for the triumph of the autonomy aesthetic in its most solipsistic form in all the arts at the *fin de siècle*:

> De la musique avant toute chose,
> Et pour cela préfère l'Impair
> Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air,
> Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose.
>
> [Let's hear the music first and foremost,
> And that means no more one-two-one-twos . . .
> Something more vague instead, something lighter
> Dissolving in air, weightless as air.][42]

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40 Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', p. 53.

41 See Martin Sorrell, 'Introduction', Paul Verlaine, *Selected Poems*, trans. Martin Sorrell (Oxford, 1999), p. xix.

42 *Selected Poems*, p. 123.

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